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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CANBERRA 000584

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/18/2019  
TAGS: [AS](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [MASS](#)  
SUBJECT: GREG COMBET: NEW JUNIOR DEFENSE MINISTER

REF: CANBERRA 542

Classified By: POLCOUNS JAMES F. COLE: REASON: 1.4 (B)

#### Summary

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¶1. (C/NF) Politician and trade unionist Greg Combet has risen quickly in Australia's parliament. First elected to Parliament in the 2007 election that swept the Australian Labor Party (ALP) to victory, he is said to have performed superbly as Parliamentary Secretary for Defense Procurement. In the June 6 cabinet reshuffle (reftel), Prime Minister Kevin Rudd named Combet Minister for Defense Personnel, Materiel and Science and Minister Assisting the Minister for Climate Change. A quiet achiever, Combet looks set to rise still further. While we know little about his views on policy, judging from his previous service on his defense portfolio and Rudd's tendency to promote individuals he trusts, Combet is certain to religiously and effectively implement Rudd's defense policies. End summary.

#### Defense Friendly

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¶2. (C/NF) Rudd appointed Combet to serve as Parliamentary Secretary for Defense Procurement from December 2007 to February 2009. In this role, Combet developed a strong grasp of the defense portfolio, and he worked well with defense technicians, possibly due to his engineering background and attention to details. After his recent appointment, Combet said that his and new Defense Minister John Faulkner's first priority was building confidence between the government and defense leadership, in part to support the Australian Defense Force (ADF) members in Afghanistan.

#### Dual Portfolios Strengthen Position with Constituents

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¶3. (C/NF) In February 2009, Combet was appointed Parliamentary Secretary for Climate Change with a focus on emissions trading, to assist Climate Change Minister Penny Wong, and was involved in negotiations with the coal industry and the unions. In June, Combet publicly noted that his defense and climate change portfolios are important to his constituents. The Hunter region in New South Wales holds military bases and defense industries, is one of Australia's most famous wine-growing areas and is the coal heartland of the state. New South Wales produces around 80 percent of the region's mined coal, providing significant employment in Combet's electorate.

## Prominent Trade Union Leader

14. (C/NF) Hailing from Labor's left and former head of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), Combet was the mastermind of the Labor Party's campaign against Work Choices, an industrial relations act that was a prominent factor in the Howard government's defeat in the 2007 federal election. Combet, previously from Victoria, campaigned in New South Wales for the 2007 Australia federal election and was voted into the House of Representatives for Charlton, as part of the Australian Labor Party's (ALP) 2007 election victory. Combet joined the ACTU in 1993 and served as union Secretary from 1999 to 2007. An effective spokesperson and leader, he coordinated numerous national wage cases to secure pay increases for low-paid Australian workers. Combet rose to prominence in 1998 when he led the union movement in the high profile waterfront dispute. He also championed union high profile waterfront dispute. He also championed union campaigns that secured employee entitlements for 16,000 workers after the collapse of Ansett airlines, and obtained a multi-billion dollar settlement from the James Hardie company for Australian asbestos victims. He relinquished the ACTU Secretary position to campaign full time in Charlton in the lead up to the federal election. Many Australian observers of labor politics think that the ACTU has lost influence with the Government since Combet left.

## Personal Information

15. (U) Combet was born on April 28, 1958 in Sydney. He earned a bachelors degree (with honors) in engineering from the University of New South Wales and a bachelors degree in

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economics and graduate diploma of labor relations and law from the University of Sydney. Early in his career, Combet worked as a coal mining trade assistant and in a range of community organizations. He is a former director of Members Equity Bank (an ACTU backed initiative designed to offer Australian workers low cost loans) and the \$30 billion retirement fund Australian Super. Combet is married to Petra Hilsen and has one daughter, one stepdaughter and one stepson.

## Comment

16. (C/NF) Combet is likely to be welcomed by defense insiders and industry experts given his strong performance on defense procurement and his ability to grasp and manage details of complicated programs. Early on, Combet had the reputation as a union guy, but he quickly proved to be sharp and industry-oriented, proving to his defense colleagues that he was the right guy, for the job. We have been impressed with his intellect and grasp of defense issues. While he was Parliamentary Secretary for Defense Procurement, Combet had a clear direction of his priorities and of which programs should be canceled. He successfully handled a number of controversial issues, including the cancellation of the problematic Seasprite Helicopter program that resulted in the loss of over AUD \$1.4 billion (US \$1.21 billion) and the well-publicized concerns surrounding the purchase of six Wedgetails, an early warning and control aircraft.

## Comment Continued

17. (C/NF) One of Combet's colleagues told us that Combet is a straight-forward operator who sometimes is frustrated by daily political machinations. In our interactions, we have found him well-informed and articulate. Although intense and serious in his approach to the issues, he has personal warmth and charm that stand him in good stead with colleagues. Among Australian political insiders, Combet has long been touted as one of the Labor Party's stars whose ultimate promotion to the Ministry was inevitable. We have found him well-disposed to U.S. visitors, and Combet has indicated he knows the U.S. is Australia's primary partner when it comes to defense. Defense and climate change are two of the most

demanding portfolios and require significant attention and intellect. The question remains whether Combet can manage both of them for a sustained period of time or if one portfolio will be handed to someone else.

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